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2019-04-18

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Monterey, California : Naval Postgraduate School

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Patrick Kuhl

April 18, 2019

The Center for Homeland Defense and Security's (CHDS) [Emergence program](#) is a unique academic experience geared towards aspiring homeland security and public safety professionals who are in the early stages of their careers. Emergence participants engage in open discussion on emerging trends in homeland security and work in an innovation lab to develop an idea for change in their organizations. As the homeland security environment evolves and becomes more complex, we need to prepare leaders to address dynamic threats in new and novel ways. So, Emergence challenges officials to enhance their critical thinking, inquiry, and analysis skills and to conduct evidence-based research to understand complex problems and to develop and implement new ideas. However, developing new strategies to make their agency more effective and to combat homeland security challenges can be a wasted effort if an individual lacks the skills to effectively communicate a problem and convince leadership to try a new solution. It's not just a matter of being able to spell-out what one of the many acronyms means or stands for; future leaders need to get *beyond the acronyms*.

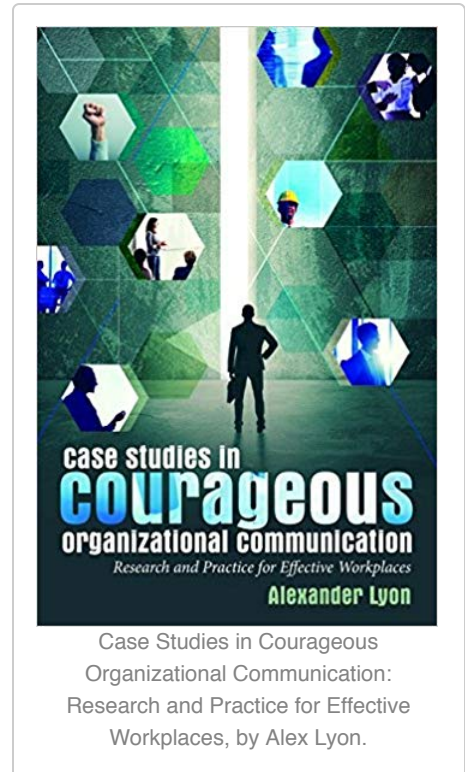
That's where Alex Lyon steps in. Alex is a [Communication Coach](#) and works with organizations on leadership, communication, and workplace relationships issues. He specializes in how to improve organizational communication, which is a perfect fit for the Emergence participants. William Powell, Emergence participant, agreed, "He had some great ideas that really stuck with me—like the exercise on how to make positive change within your organization to benefit multiple parties." Alex is currently a tenured associate professor in the [Communication Department at The College at Brockport](#), State University of New York (SUNY), near Rochester, NY. He has done workshops for clients like Google, Nike, McKinsey & Company, and Boeing. Recently, he published an online course on leadership for LinkedIn (who recently acquired [Lynda.com](#)). "He was outstanding and perfect for the Emergence group. It was evident the participants benefited from his presentation. He gave them considerable insight on how to communicate more effectively in the workplace and within their positions," said Ellen Gordon, Associate Director Executive Education Program.



Photo courtesy of Alex Lyon

Alex grew up in Rhode Island and studied communication as an undergraduate at Rhode Island College in Providence. He was motivated to continue studying communication at the graduate level due to the relational complexities he experienced in the work environment. So, shortly after receiving his B.A., Alex entered the CSU Northridge master's program in communication in 1996. Upon graduation, he chose to continue his graduate-level education and pursue a Ph.D. at the University of Colorado.

After receiving his Doctorate, Alex was offered a position as an Assistant Professor at the University of Arkansas in Little Rock. There, he continued learning from his fellow faculty about research, writing, and tackling the real-world communication and relationship problems people grapple with in the workplace. He started publishing original research in mainstream, peer-reviewed academic journals during his time in Little Rock. He also gave talks to various organizations that ranged from one-hour presentations to two-day workshops. "CHDS was my first type of client that is geared toward government agencies and/or homeland security & emergency management," Lyon shared. "But it really piqued my interest because I do write a little bit about crisis communication for leadership and it's an area I have been researching." His latest book is titled, "Case Studies in Courageous Organizational Communication: Research and Practice for Effective Workplaces" and is very relevant to the mission of homeland defense and emergency management. By presenting 31 case studies in organizational communication, Lyon identifies a successful model around four themes: Courageous communication is collaborative, upward, transparent, and engaging. The case studies often start out the same, but the outcomes can be dramatically different, depending on how the organization communicated about the crisis before and after the event.



The Emergence students are required to develop an idea for positive change within their organization and pitch it to their leadership before the next in-residence session. This type of project is right in Alex's wheelhouse. "The primary responsibilities of their jobs depend on their ability to communicate effectively, but it's a skill that often gets overlooked," added David O'Keeffe, CHDS Senior Advisor. "Continuous education and development will benefit them in current and future positions of leadership." Alex spent an afternoon with the group and focused on being a more effective communicator in the workplace. The first half of the session identified common communication challenges we experience in the workplace, why those challenges happen, and the strategies and tools for addressing them. The second half of the session discussed how to speak persuasively and convince others that your ideas are valid. They used the elevator pitch framework as a tool for catching people's attention and getting briefing time for a formal presentation. Then they discussed what kind of components and techniques provide foundation for a good presentation or briefing or sales pitch. Lyon summarized, "We all come in with a package of technical skills and expertise on one half of the equation but if you want to collaborate and engage

stakeholders, you have to be able to talk to people in a way that's going to resonate and make sense to them if you want to build those relationships—and it's really hard to do that when you're used to talking exclusively with people that work in the same exact field. We have to learn how to tell our story to folks outside of our silos and that starts with effective communication.”

Later that day, the Emergence officials used the Innovation Lab to develop an elevator pitch for their innovative idea and practice the pitch on their classmates and receive feedback. Over the next two days, every Emergence participant had the opportunity to give a 2-minute presentation on their idea to the cohort. This exercise allowed the participants to apply what they learned from Alex, practice the pitch to their leadership, and receive feedback from the cohort. Powell lauded the exercise, “I think Alex was very helpful in terms of making us consider how do we frame and communicate what our

ideas are, when speaking with different types of audiences.” Although, perhaps just as important, it also allowed the cohort to hear each other's ideas and learn about the different organizational challenges that each agency faces, while identifying opportunities for participants to assist one another with research and collaborate on initiatives. Lyon emphasized the collaboration aspect within homeland security and emergency management by stating, “We build these relationships so when we need to leverage it in the future, it's already been established. But how can we establish these ongoing, mutually-beneficial positive relationships? It starts by learning how to talk to people. So, for example, when a crises happens, you already have those connections to lean on because the trust has been established. That will speed up our ability to respond to such crises in a more effective way.”

As an associate professor at The College of Brockport, Alex is constantly learning, practicing, and refining the way he communicates with various audiences. It's apparent that his work, research, teaching, and consulting will continue to provide valuable content for the Emergence program. “The Emergence group was truly engaged; the session was in danger of going over the allotted time limit,” said O'Keeffe. In fact, the first session with Emergence cohort 1901 was so successful, Alex will be back in October to work with our incoming cohort of Emergence participants, and help the next generation of homeland security leaders get beyond the acronyms.



Alex in the classroom, working with Emergence participants.

